

**TESTIMONY BY TERRY SCHIAVONE,
REGIONAL ADMINISTRATOR,
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BEFORE THE GEORGIA HOUSE MOTOR VEHICLE SUBCOMMITTEE ON
ON THE MERITS OF HOUSE BILL 18
JANUARY 12, 2006**

afternoon
Good ~~morning~~. My name is Terry Schiavone. I would like to thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, especially Representative Calvin Hill, for inviting me to testify on the merits of House Bill 18, an important piece of legislation that - if enacted-will save the lives of many Georgians.

I am the Southeast Regional Administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration -- also known as NHTSA -- an agency of the U.S. Department of Transportation. NHTSA is the Federal agency charged with reducing the devastating toll of lives lost and personal suffering from traffic crashes each year. Our goal at DOT and NHTSA is to reduce the annual toll of some 42,000 deaths, 3,000,000 injuries, and \$230 billion in societal costs due to motor vehicle crashes in America.

In 2004 (which is the most recent year for which data are available), of the 42,000 motor vehicle deaths nationally, 1,634 occurred in Georgia. Largely preventable, these fatal crashes not only impact the lives and livelihood of victims and their families, but also cost Georgia about \$7.8 billion each year in medical expenses, lost productivity, property damage, and related costs. Currently, each citizen of Georgia pays \$960 toward these costs each year whether they are in a crash or not.

The bill your Subcommittee is considering today, House Bill 18, would save lives and reduce costs in Georgia by requiring passengers in both cars and pickup trucks to be restrained.

Safety belt use is proven to save lives. Safety belts work; indeed, NHTSA research shows that, considering all vehicles at all speeds, safety belts cut your risk of death in a crash in half. At our current safety belt use rate of 82 percent, NHTSA estimates that safety belts will prevent 15,700 fatalities, 350,000 serious injuries, and \$67 billion in economic costs associated with traffic injuries and deaths every year. This great state has already enacted a primary safety belt law for passenger cars. The bill you are considering today would simply extend this life-saving benefit to those in pickup trucks.

NHTSA estimates that for every percentage point increase in safety belt usage rates nationally, an additional 270 lives could be saved -- up to 7,300 more lives would be saved if *everyone* buckled up nationwide.

It might surprise you to learn that Georgia is one of only two primary belt law States that exempts drivers of pickup trucks from the safety belt use requirement (Indiana is the other). While we appreciate that your safety belt law permits primary enforcement by police officers at the State, county and municipal levels for all other types of passenger vehicles, there is no safety or statistical rationale for exempting pickup truck occupants from the lifesaving protection that safety belt use provides.

On the contrary, safety belts prevent ejection from a motor vehicle in the event of a sudden deceleration or a crash. NHTSA research shows that pickup trucks are nearly twice as likely to roll over as passenger cars (with ejection more likely to occur) and we know that safety belts are about 80 percent effective in preventing fatalities in these types of crashes. By exempting pickup trucks from your primary law, Georgia eliminates protection for one of your highest risk groups.

It is easy to be lulled into a false sense of security due to a pickup truck's girth and solid construction; but in 2004, 285 people were killed while riding in pickup trucks in Georgia. Of these pickup truck deaths, 67.4 percent were not using a safety belt; this figure compares to 40.5 percent of those killed in passenger cars who were unrestrained.

Additionally, 36.1 percent of those killed in pick up trucks – 103 of your citizens - were ejected from the vehicle during the crash.

While pickup truck ownership is an indispensable part of life in rural Georgia, people in rural areas die at a higher rate per capita than people living in urban or suburban areas. Nationally, the passenger vehicle occupant fatality rate in rural areas is more than double that in urban areas. In Georgia, 56 percent of all passenger vehicle occupant deaths occurred in rural areas.

Safety belt use offers motorists in rural communities a fighting chance at surviving the impact of crashes that occur on rural roadways far removed from emergency medical services, local hospitals, 9-1-1 service and other resources that can help save their lives in an emergency.

Unfortunately, the total number of traffic fatalities in Georgia has increased from 1,603 in 2003 to 1,634 in 2004, due in part to the lack of safety belt use by pickup truck drivers and passengers. Deaths in pickup trucks increased from 264 in 2003 to 285 in 2004. If death, injury and human suffering alone do not convince you to change your law--- consider the economic costs. In 2000, safety belt use saved our Nation about \$50 billion in medical care, lost productivity, and other injury-related costs. Conversely, not using safety belts cost society about \$26 billion. People not involved in the crash paid three-quarters of these costs through insurance premiums, taxes, and uninsured medical cost. If your State amends its primary belt law to include pickup trucks, our studies forecast that an additional 21 lives would be saved, 300 serious injuries would be prevented, and over \$62 million in economic costs would be saved annually.

On August 10, Congress enacted a new Federal incentive grant program contained in the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) [P.L. 109-59, Section 2005] that I believe could reduce the burden for the taxpayer and benefit Georgia's highway safety program. The program to which I refer is an incentive grant program to the States to raise safety belt usage. States can

qualify by enacting a conforming primary safety belt use law or by maintaining at least 85 percent safety belt use for two consecutive years beginning in 2007.

The quickest way to earn these grant funds for your state is to bring your current primary law into conformity. SAFETEA-LU specifically states that laws which do not cover pickup trucks will not be eligible. If Georgia enacts a conforming law by June 30 and is enforcing the law by mid-September, your state will receive grant funds this year. If you choose to rely on your safety belt use rate to qualify, the earliest you could receive grant funds would be 2008.

With a complying law, Georgia would receive a one-time grant of \$20.7 million, with no requirement for a State match. These funds can be used for any highway safety-related purpose including highway safety infrastructure improvements. This funding is a unique opportunity for Georgia to enhance its highway safety infrastructure or to establish new behavioral programs focused in rural areas, thereby saving many lives and preventing thousands of serious injuries.

If the pickup truck exemption is removed as outlined in House Bill 18, Georgia would join four other Southeastern States (Alabama, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee) with primary belt laws covering both passenger cars and pickup trucks. A strong, science-based safety belt law and continuing active law enforcement are Georgia's most valuable tools for stimulating increased and lasting gains in safety belt use. By closing loopholes and making enforcement of the law easier, HB 18 will spur further increases in overall State safety belt use and save lives.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am available to answer any questions.